

Finding Solutions to the Problem of Migrant Housing

By Council President Scott Peters, First District

California recently celebrated its newest state holiday in honor of Cèsar Chàvez. The March 31 holiday was created by the state legislature in the year 2000, to recognize Chavez' efforts to improve working conditions for migrant farm workers. Twenty years after his "Wrath of Grapes" campaign to protect agricultural employees from harmful pesticides, Chàvez' legacy lives on in the effort to find temporary housing for California migrant workers.

Regardless of your views on the country's immigration policy, the reality is that hundreds of migrant farm workers, here both legally and illegally, live in the canyons around Carmel Valley. They toil in the fields that used to spread from I-5 to Rancho Peñasquitos, but which are rapidly disappearing due to residential development approved by voters in 1998.

The workers' makeshift camps have no running water or toilet facilities, posing a health and safety hazard to our community. The fires they set for warmth and to cook their food could pose a serious fire risk to surrounding homes. This is a public safety issue, as well as a humanitarian one. And it is an issue I am determined to do something about.

The state of California runs the Joe Serna, Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant program to help cities construct temporary housing for agricultural workers. San Diego applied for a Serna grant last year. The grant provides up to \$3 million in construction and development costs. The city is required to match that through the donation of city-owned land for a term of 40 years. The money comes from Proposition 46, approved by state voters in 2002.

The housing funded by the grant would be temporary and open only to citizens and legally documented migrants working in local agriculture. Migrants who apply and qualify for the program would be charged a nightly fee, and housed six to a trailer. While this housing would be a vast improvement over the makeshift camps, it is by no means glamorous. The goal of the program is to move the migrants out of the canyons and into a central, safe location. That's good for local residents and the migrant workers.

Over the past year, a task force of city employees, housing and agriculture experts have considered and rejected a number of industrial or city-owned sites in and near Sorrento Valley. The ideal site will be close to employment centers and transit, with water and sewer access and free from environmental restrictions. Another concern is the impact such a site would have on the surrounding community. For all of these reasons, we have yet to find a suitable site.

While the city can do very little about national immigration policy, there are things we can do here to protect our children and families, and the migrant workers living in our community. I am committed to finding a solution to the problem of makeshift migrant

camps. The Serna grant is a great way to use state and local resources to address this issue.